

Against Bureaucracy

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(Graphic by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

This article argues against bureaucracy, which is choking the military. It explains how red-tape routine corrodes the deep competence and independence that are critical to mission command, and it portrays the devastating rise of the military bureaucracy as a failure of leadership.

The Mission Command Idea

The doctrine of mission command derives from *Auftragstaktik*, a German army methodology that espouses initiative at lower levels of command.¹ Perceived and realized in the Napoleonic Wars, *Auftragstaktik* achieved prominence in the German

armies during the First and Second World Wars, finding forceful and famous expression in the 1933 *Truppenführung*—the German army manual for troop command.² Articulating the mission command idea, the *Truppenführung* underlines the strategic value of individual soldiers amidst the confusion of conflict, arguing, “the emptiness of the battlefield requires soldiers who can think and act independently, who can make calculated decisions and daring use of every situation.”³ In its discussion of Auftragstaktik, the *Truppenführung* sets down views that “would still be considered radical in many of the world’s armies today.”⁴

Written largely by Generals Ludwig Beck, Werner von Fritsch, and Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, the *Truppenführung* established that individual soldiers would be expected to have a clear understanding of circumstances so they could act on their own initiative in accordance with larger strategic intent. Giving doctrinal weight to ideas known later by U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Charles Krulak’s colloquialism—the “strategic corporal”—the editors of the *Truppenführung* recall Hans von Seeckt, who argued, “The principal thing is to increase the responsibilities of the individual man, particularly his independence of action, and thereby to increase the efficiency of the entire army.”⁵

But, while ideas of initiative and enterprise resonate in military lore, they have become essentially rhetorical since militaries have grown more centralized, less adaptable, more prescriptive, and more bureaucratic. Honeycombed by legalism, avoidance behavior, and inconclusive language, bureaucracy cultivates irresolution, and excuse. Bureaucracy suffocates personal trustworthiness, which should distinguish leaders, and the independent responsibility that hallmarks effective soldiers.

Merit and Responsibility

Richard Gabriel explains why bureaucratic thinking is antithetic to that of the military, arguing it is “nonsense when ... institutions attempt to substitute bureaucratic procedures for ethical judgment and responsibility. [The end result is] a reliance upon bureaucratic rules and mechanisms of control, while undercutting the soldier’s opportunities to exercise ethical judgment.”⁶

Arguing against bureaucratic thinking, Gabriel points to what Michel Foucault called the “subtle,

calculated technology of subjugation ... the separation, coordination and supervision of tasks [that] constitutes an operational schema of power.”⁷ This is bureaucratic panopticism, designed “to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates,” which Alasdair MacIntyre understood to depend for success upon disguise and concealment.⁸ Valued for calculable data, for seeming impartiality, and for the centralization of its control, bureaucracy commodifies people and dissolves moral autonomy.

The bureaucracy’s oppressive attention to marginal detail is in parallel with the technical evolution of communications networks, which have made it possible and appealing for headquarters to exercise control to a meddlesome degree. Bureaucratic centralization means information from the seat of events is passed upward to headquarters, which issue direction. This dissolves the autonomy of individuals and, as Jim Storr observes, is fundamentally unconstructive since

the amount of information passed between a group of people increases roughly with the square of the number involved (a consequence of many-to-many information strategies), while the ability to deal with it increases only linearly.⁹

Red-Tape Routine

Inherently centralizing and controlling, red tape has the overwhelming effect of inhibiting human initiative and responsibility. There comes to be a Kuhnian cultural gestalt or paradigm.¹⁰ Samuel Huntington describes a “professional mind,” which structures distinctive

and persistent habits of thought and action—framing a worldview from within which bureaucratic behavior is rationalized.¹¹

Pervasive and suppressive, bureaucracy induces habits of wooden compliance. Soldiers are duped by a culture of compulsory consensus into thinking character equals rule

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following, but soldiers must think differently; the military system fails them. Soldiers, who ought to think for themselves and act decisively, are disabled by the military proclivity for bureaucratic hesitancy. They are deceived and compromised by the cordial hypocrisy that hallmarks military life. The 2012 Australian Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade References Committee's *Procurement Procedures for Defence Capital Projects: Final Report* offers an illustration. The report noted that in the Australian Defence Organisation,

personnel get “bogged down” with too much paper work ... and “miss the important things going on” ... [There are] confused or blurred lines of responsibility ... [and] accountability that is too diffuse to be effective—the organisation is unable or unwilling to hold people to account ... [As well, people have] little understanding or appreciation of the importance of contestability and a mindset simply cannot, or refuses to, comprehend the meaning of “independent advice.”¹²

This report spells out the officialdom, which dissolves individual decision. The report makes clear that, inoculated by bureaucracy, soldiers are immunized against self-reliance; their sense of responsibility is numbed by rituals of fudging and double-talk.

Yet, responsible independence is critical; for soldiers to be effective, it is insufficient that they are obedient, that they follow conventions, and that they abide by rules. Soldiers also must be conscientious and decisive. They must answer the call to individual action, which is constricted in the bureaucratic system. Regarded by Jonathan Shay as “the most fundamental incompetence in the Vietnam War,” the misapplication of bureaucratic-process thinking is an institutional failing and the death knell for autonomous and strategically effectual soldiers.¹³

Dereliction of Duty

Military enlistment confers not an excuse to be obedient at all costs, but an obligation to act deliberately for justice. Underlining this idea, philosopher Jeff McMahan asks rhetorically how establishment by certain people of political or bureaucratic relations among themselves may confer on them a right to behave in ways that are impermissible in the absence of those relations. McMahan asks, “How could it be that merely by acting collectively for political goals, people can shed

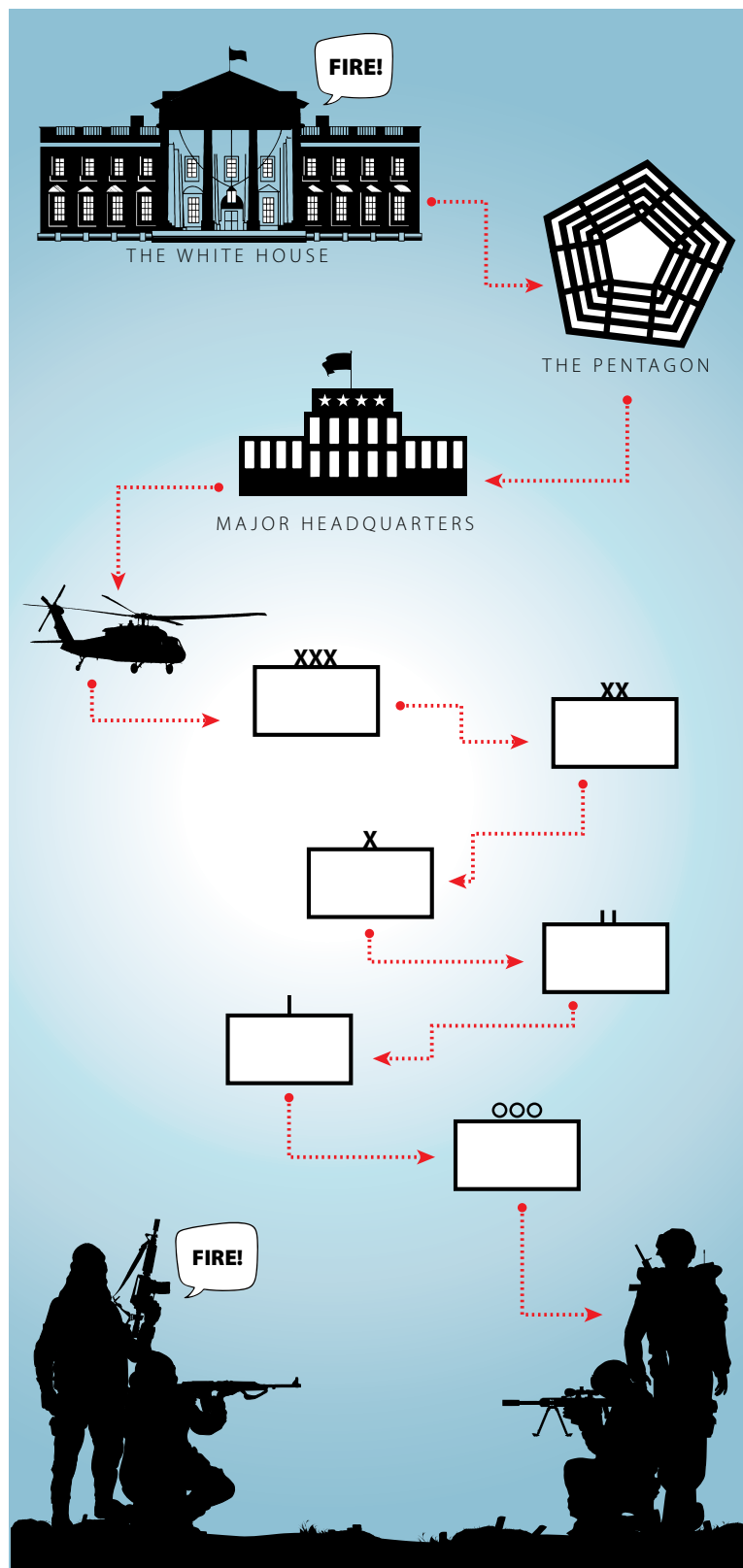
the moral constraints that bind them when they act merely as individuals?”¹⁴ He illuminates the moral duty people bear as individuals. These obligations are jeopardized by the modern bureaucracy.

Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster makes the risk plain in his book, *Dereliction of Duty*. Considering the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Lyndon Johnson's presidency, McMaster describes “five silent men.”¹⁵ He describes how the Joint Chiefs, trapped by an alleged military code in routines of bureaucratic deference, were acquiescent and persuadable. These men were silent when they should have spoken, malleable when they ought to have been conscientious and uncompromising.

Analyzing the political calamity of Vietnam, McMaster describes a uniquely human failing. Among the many and reinforcing frailties he identifies, the biggest was the craving by the Joint Chiefs for approval, their need to appear loyal, to fit in, and to do the accepted thing. Playing along with bureaucratic convention, the Joint Chiefs abdicated their responsibility to speak up and to exert constructive influence over the policy they were entrusted to enact. The generals failed to act with the purpose and resolution expected of the soldier. Conforming reflexively to familiar punctilios, the generals perpetuated the dependencies of bureaucratic custom. Their rococo politesse and invertebrate conformance embellished military failure.

History provides examples of the failure by soldiers to measure up. In his text *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, Harry Mulisch coined the term “psycho-technology,” which describes the bureaucratic engrossment with obedience and the culpable torpor that sustains bureaucratic habit.¹⁶ Mulisch explained how “a dull group of godforsaken civil servants doing their godforsaken duty” turned the bureaucracy into a weapon—and an excuse.¹⁷ The polymath Charles Percy Snow underlines the evil that follows from unthinking conformance:

When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion. If you doubt that, read William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The German Officer Corps were brought up in the most rigorous code of



(Graphic by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

The Conundrum of Bureaucracy versus Mission Command

obedience ... in the name of obedience they were party to, and assisted in, the most wicked large-scale actions in the history of the world.¹⁸

Conditioned by bureaucracy to obey, soldiers may commit crimes of obedience: acts “performed in response to orders from authority that [are] considered illegal or immoral by the larger community.”¹⁹ Such crimes reveal the military delusion that the observance of routine equals rightness, while deviation from standard procedure is the opposite. But military people have allowed themselves to be duped against the weight of evidence. There is no failure to understand.

The strategic implication of unthinking compliance at the tactical level is well known. As an illustrative phrase, the strategic corporal derived rhetorical power from appreciation of the large-scale significance of tactical autonomy.

Focused on formalities and official rules, the bureaucracy fails to secure background conditions critical to effective soldiering. Bound by red tape and conditioned to seek the go-ahead before they do anything, soldiers are not conditioned to trust their own judgment, to act responsibly on their initiative. They are made hesitant by the unfair application of justice.

Failure of Leadership

In the modern military bureaucracy, the soldier who loses a rifle suffers more obviously than the general who loses the war. This is because senior elites, who do not police themselves or their friends, are too good at ducking responsibility. Their shortcomings are on record, since their legalistic dodging hallmarks the official reports, which follow the fiascos.

The reports are important since they reveal the habituated phraseology of people unaccustomed to taking a stand. Shy of moral language, scared of ideals, overeager to seek the asylum of formulaic and morally



The Royal Australian Navy's Kaman SH-2G(A) Super Seasprite helicopter 19 March 2005 at the Avalon Airport in Avalon, Victoria, Australia. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

meaningless language, the official reports allow bureaucrats to speak for themselves.

The report of the Australian National Audit Office into the Super Seasprite helicopter project offers a prime example. The significance of this report lies in the official trick language—the slippery, astute, and downright devious words and phrases with which the military bureaucracy is regrettably comfortable.²⁰

Super Seasprite helicopters were acquired to enhance the capability of the Royal Australian Navy's eight ANZAC class ships. The project was approved in February 1996, with a budget of \$746 million, and provisionally accepted aircraft were operated by the Navy between late 2003 and early 2006, when flying was suspended. The project was canceled in 2008. Overall, expenditure exceeded \$1.4 billion.

The Seasprite report reveals a bureaucracy riddled with habits of avoidance. Despite evident waste and obvious failure—since no Seasprite helicopter capability exists, or ever existed—the Australian National Audit Office report manages to avoid moral language and ideas. The word “wrong,” for example, occurs three times in the report. On pages 260 and 319, the word

“wrong” appears in the phrase, “wrong side of the aircraft.” On page 334, we read of a “wrong impression.” Despite the nonevent that was the Seasprite helicopter, no person is seen to have been wrong. No person is seen to have made a mistake.

Yet, recalling Robert Kempner's interrogation of the truculent Wannsee participants after the Second War, there were people who “knew the things you had to know,” and who made the decisions significant people make.²¹ Such people accept large salaries from the public purse to remunerate the heavy burdens of responsibility. Incredibly, no person was considered responsible. No person was wrong. No person was found to bear any blame.

The word “blame” appears once in the report, on page 333, where we read that the Australian National Audit Office Report “summarise(s) the apportionment of blame against the audit objective to identify those

factors that contributed to the ongoing poor performance of the project.” So, factors are responsible, but not people. And, the word “responsible” appears in the report as a descriptive word in reference to legal or bureaucratic responsibility. The word responsible is never used in a normative or moral sense.

Materially unrevealing and inscrutable, this report was accepted by the bureaucracy as an explanation. But the report is not enlightening, not a proper account of reasons why the Seasprite project failed. Gnomish phrasing, such as “the failure of the project to provide the required capability,” skirts around the fact that the project was an unequivocal catastrophe.²² The project is described as “canceled,” not “failed.”²³

Evading moral ideas by euphemism, the Seasprite report, and the others like it, speaks in the voice of a bureaucracy preserving its *modus operandi* and senior cadre. Lacking any sense of right and wrong, the report reveals a critical insolvency and demonstrates the need for institutional reform. On what basis, then, can soldiers be expected to face grave psychological and physical dangers, when the big fish cannot face the truth?

In the words of Adm. R. C. Moffitt’s *Review of Submarine Workforce Sustainability*, there is a “crisis of leadership” and a feckless “benign acceptance of the status quo [among] more senior rank groups.”²⁴ Describing the “poor leadership,” of people “in positions of power,” Moffitt recalls the tone and accent of Lord Peter Levene’s 2011 review of the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence.²⁵ Investigating the senescence of British military bureaucracy, Levene makes official shortcomings explicit. In categorical style, Levene criticizes a “culture of consensual, committee-based decision-making,” and an institutionalized failure to hold people to account.²⁶ Notably, he identifies an overinflated senior cadre, a pervasive “inability to take tough, timely decisions,” and an insidious “conspiracy of optimism.”²⁷

The Western Military Hypocrisy

No military ought to expect soldiers to face danger while bureaucrats sit in pleasant chairs, unwilling to face facts. But, this is precisely the nature of the Western military hypocrisy.

When some people write shrewd reports to disguise real reasons and other people accept those

reports as a knowing gloss-over, which diminishes or disguises the gravity of events, then no people seem to have the self-respect and courage to stand for truth and right. Confronted by an adversary, motivated by the most repellent ideology to commit acts of abhorrent viciousness, such a failure of the Western military bureaucracy is deeply concerning.

Speaking to these ideas, Norman Dixon observed in his seminal work *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* how military officers regularly slough off all sense of moral awareness. Dixon’s concern was that officers, convinced of their own superiority, lose all feeling for the moral basis upon which they exercise command.²⁸ Similarly, on the account of this paper, military leaders, habituated to bureaucratic hokum, lose touch with ideals that will inspire soldiers to act decisively with a mind to translating high ideals into practice.

Conclusion

The military must wean itself from the heroin of bureaucracy. Writing should be judged by clarity and power, not by margins and tabulations. Speaking should be frank and courteous, not phobic and weak-kneed. Action should be purposeful.

Medal of Honor recipient Vice Adm. James Stockdale illustrates this idea powerfully. As president of the U.S. Naval War College, Stockdale argued against the overprominence of legalistic and bureaucratic thinking. Arguing against officers’ ticket punching (focusing on) organizational efficiency at the expense of honor, Stockdale observed,

In the Naval Service we have no place for amoral gnomes lost in narrow orbits; we need to keep our gaze fixed on the high-minded principles standing above the law. ...

Today’s ranks are filled with officers who have been weaned on slogans and fads of the sort preached in the better business schools of the country. That is to say that rational managerial concepts will cure all evils. ... We must regain our bearings. ...

Regardless of the fairness of our judicial system, it must not be allowed to take the place of moral obligation to ourselves, to our Service, to our country. Each man must bring himself to some stage of ethical resolution.²⁹ ■

Notes

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2. Jim Storr, "A Command Philosophy for the Information Age: The Continuing Relevance of Mission Command," *Defence Studies* 3, no. 3 (2003): 119, 121–22.
3. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 18.
4. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 4.
5. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine* (January 1999), accessed 21 September 2016, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm; Hans von Seeckt, "Observations of the Chief of the Army Command Based on His Observations in 1925," *United States Military Intelligence Reports: Germany, 1919–1941* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), quoted in Condell and Zabecki, "Editors' Introduction," 4.
6. Richard Gabriel, *To Serve With Honor: A Treatise on Military Ethics and the Way of the Soldier* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 13.
7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 221.
8. Ibid., 195–97; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 109.
9. Storr, "A Command Philosophy," 126.
10. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 114, 150–51.
11. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), 61.
12. Australian Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade References Committee, *Procurement Procedures for Defence Capital Projects: Final Report* (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia: Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, August 2012), xxi.
13. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 17.
14. Jeff McMahan, "Collectivist Defenses of the Moral Equality of Combatants," *Journal of Military Ethics* 6, no. 1 (2007): 53.
15. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 330.
16. Harry Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, trans. Robert Naborn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 113.
17. Ibid., 141.
18. Charles P. Snow, *Public Affairs* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 195.
19. Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 46.
20. Australian Auditor General Audit Report No. 41 2008–09, *The Super Seasprite* (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia: Australian National Audit Office, 2009), accessed 22 September 2016, https://www.anao.gov.au/sites/g/files/net616/fi/ANAO_Report_2008-2009_41.pdf.
21. Robert Kempner, *Das Dritte Reich im Kreuzverhör: Aus den Uniröfentlichten Vernehmungsprotokollen des Anklagers* (Königstein/Taunus: Athenäum/Droste Taschenbücher, 1980), 189 (Kempner was interrogating Erich Neumann), cited in Mark Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration* (London: Folio, 2012), 61.
22. *The Super Seasprite Report*, para. 9. The phrase is repeated at paragraph 1.26 on page 66.
23. Ibid., 278, para. 10.60. The idea of "project failure" occurs once, in a subheading where the discussion concerns the cost of cancellation.
24. R. C. Moffitt, *Report of the Review of Submarine Workforce Sustainability* (Royal Australian Navy, 31 October 2008), 64–65, para. 7.3, and 13, para. 3.2.3, accessed 22 September 2016, <http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/SubmarineWorkforceSustainability.pdf>.
25. Ibid., 99, para. 12.4.2.
26. Peter K. Levene et al., *Defence Reform: An Independent Report into the Structure and Management of the Ministry of Defence*, also known as *The Levene Report* (London: Ministry of Defence, June 2011), 21, para. 4.6, 4.7; and 41, para. 8.20, accessed 22 September 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27408/defence_reform_report_struct_mgt_mod_27june2011.pdf. Also, in 59, para. 13.6, Levene argues that senior people whose performances fall short should be managed more "robustly."
27. Ibid., key recommendation 11, p. 71, and p. 13, para. 2.3.
28. Simon Raven, "Perish by the Sword," *Encounter* 12 (May 1959): 37–49, cited in *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 48.
29. James Bond Stockdale, "Taking Stock," *United States Naval War College Review* 31, no. 2 (1978): 2, accessed 22 September 2016, <https://www.usnwc.edu/Publications/Naval-War-College-Review/ArchivedIssues/1970s/1978-Fall.aspx>.